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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an anecdotal account of racial relations and integration efforts in West Virginia before and after the Brown decision, from the perspective of the publisher of the "Charleston Gazette," The struggle for racial equality in West Virginia has been filled with contradictions. The first legal action taken in West Virginia against a board of education occurred in 1926 to permit Blacks to use the facilities of Charleston's public library. Blacks began attending West Virginia University extension classes in the mid-1920s, and graduate and professional schools of the university were opened in 1938 following a Supreme Court decision. For a decade prior to the Brown case, conferences sponsored by the State Department of Education were integrated in all activities, and in some counties Black and White teachers' meetings were integrated, as were some county secondary principals' meetings. Immediately following the Brown decision, all curricula and facilities at State colleges were opened without racial restriction. In the first year after Brown, all White State schools except one enrolled a few Blacks and the State's two Black schools enrolled Whites. Integration did not occur as quickly in the State as it should have, it is said, but the West Virginia record compares favorably with what happened elsewhere. While school integration continued many institutions and facilities such as restaurants and hotels remained segregated. Across the State, the media's reaction to the Brown decision was accepting. (KH)

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DESEGREGATION/INTEGRATION AND THE MEDIA
FALLOUT FROM THE BROWN DECISION IN WEST VIRGINIA

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I'm honored to be here tonight and feel unworthy for several reasons. One: I am not a scholar and don't have the academic credentials or researcher background to do justice to my task. Two: Newspapers are interested in what happens today, not yesterday, and I have that occupational handicap. I am a now person. Three: This may be the most important reason of all. I was privileged, or not, depending upon your viewpoint, never to have been required to ride in the back of a bus.

Before I tackle the subject, a personal reminiscence. This spring the Gazette will sponsor the forty-eighth running of the Gazette relays. Originally, the relays were restricted to white schools. How the barrier was cracked may be of interest. One afternoon in the early 1950's, prior to the Brown ruling, a gentleman came into my office, sat down, and introduced himself as Harry E. Dennis, principal of Garnet High School. I was then Gazette Promotion Manager. He asked if Garnet's track team could enter a team in the relays. The absurdity of not allowing Garnet, Kanawha County's Black high school, to compete was brought home to me when Principal Dennis noted that we permitted teams from Ohio to participate. Ohio schools, being integrated, had numerous Black athletes. I would like to be able to say this ridiculous inequity was corrected at once, but such wasn't the case, if my memory isn't playing me false. It was corrected the next year. One other detail of Principal Dennis' visit has stayed with me over the years. As he was about to leave, I told him that I thought it was wonderful of him, a white man, to champion Blacks. He looked at me with astonishment and said, "Mr. Chilton, I'm a Negro. At that time, Charleston's theaters

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Presneted at the Symposium celebrating Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court Decision of 1954 (Institute, WV, February 10-11 and April 11-13, 1984)

barred Blacks. Not even a special section was available, although Charleston's Municipal Auditorium sold tickets, first come, first served. Anytime Principal Dennis wished to see a movie, which wasn't very often, he had no trouble passing, and he told me of an incident in a southern community that reminded me of what happened to Walter White, former head of the NAACP. In Atlanta, White went to a baseball game one afternoon and sat in the section designated "Colored Only." A burly policeman soon spotted him and told him to get out of there and sit in the section which he belonged and quit trying to cause trouble.

At this juncture, let me say that Fred Glazer, Director of West Virginia Library Systems, Elizabeth Scobell of your own library, and Lawrence V. Jordan, former Supervisor of Student Teaching at West Virginia State, supplied much of the information I'm about to relay to you. Let me hasten to add that any glaring errors are not attributable to them but wholly to me.

The struggle for racial equality in West Virginia is filled with contradictions. Who was on the wrong side of Brown versus The Board of Education of Topeka? John W. Davis, the only West Virginian who ever ran for president, in 1924, who in his youth had defended Mother Mary Jones and socialist Eugene V. Debs and who became the nation's most distinguished constitutional lawyer, was on the wrong side. A footnote: Davis' daughter, Julie, and the wife of Thurgood Marshall, who won the Brown case, sat beside each other while father and husband argued before the nine Supreme Court justices. To balance Davis' representation to retain a national evil we have, once the decision had been rendered, the action of West Virginia Governor William Marland. He said, and I quote: West Virginia will combine schools quietly and smoothly. We will do whatever is right and proper. The law is the law. It applies to everyone of the two million citizens of West Virginia.

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Governor Marland's firm stand was endorsed by the State Superintendent of Schools, then an elected constitutional officer, and by Attorney General John Fox. Fox declined an invitation to attend a conference of legal officers called by Georgia's Governor Herman Talmadge, saying he wouldn't join an effort to defy the national law. Thus, the proper tone was set, but the readiness of West Virginia's executives to obey the law of the land didn't produce instantaneous integration. Their willingness did make clear, however, that despite the segregation mandate in its constitution, West Virginia no longer would heed this illegality or side with states formerly found in the confederacy whence West Virginia had split during the Civil War. Also instructive was the warning from a northern county judge. Upon hearing that a number of parents had determined to boycott the public schools because of integration, the judge declared that West Virginia law provided that children must attend school until age sixteen. If a concerted effort was mounted to break the law and prevent children from being educated, he announced that he would put them in jail until their feet stuck out. That ended the anti-integration movement in Marion County.

Another personal reminiscence. A year or so after Brown, Benjamin Fine, Education Editor of The New York Times, took a trip through the south which included Charleston, West Virginia, to report on the progress of integration. One evening he sat in my home with my sister and my wife, Betty, and told us that Charleston's public school system was more integrated than New York City's.

Blacks began attending West Virginia University extension classes in the mid-1920's. Graduate and professional schools of the university were opened in 1938 following a Supreme Court decision.

In 1948, the state's Attorney General opined that state law didn't prohibit the teaching of two races in private schools of nursing. The opinion was interpreted to include all private schools and colleges, and shortly thereafter, Black

students were admitted to one catholic high school and to Alderson Broaddus, West Virginia Wesleyan, Bethany, and Davis and Elkins.

For a decade prior to the Brown case, conferences sponsored by the West Virginia Department of Education were integrated in all activities, business and social. Additionally, in some counties Black and white teacher's meetings were integrated, as were some county secondary principal's meetings.

Immediately following the Brown Decision, all curricula and facilities at state colleges and the state's one university at that time were opened without racial restriction. That first year, all white schools except Glenville enrolled a few Blacks and the state's two Black schools enrolled whites.

Sixteen of West Virginia's fifty-five counties did not integrate schools. Nine had no Black schools. Officials of one of the thirty integrating counties, Mr. Jordan didn't provide its name, enrolled a Black during the summer session, subsequently changed their minds and announced that the county would revert to a policy of segregation in the fall of 1954. The same county enrolled five white students in trade courses in a Black school and one white student in a Black elementary school. Thirteen counties integrated some schools but not others. Still another county witnessed some Black students attending the Black high school in the morning and one of the white high schools in the afternoon.

These examples are furnished to illuminate the truth that just as segregation in West Virginia made no sense, the same, alas, applied to integration at the outset.

Worse was the fact that while schools were integrated, many institutions and facilities weren't. Restaurants remained closed to Blacks. About that time, Woodrum's in Charleston, far and away the biggest and best furniture store in the state, opened a splendid tea room. From the start it was integrated. But it was years before Charleston's Diamond Department Store integrated its dining

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facility. Again, I recall a personal incident. Following an editorial in which the Gazette chastised the Diamond for senseless sales practices, offering merchandise to Blacks while limiting services to them, I received, late one afternoon at home, a telephone call from the department store's president. After remonstrating with me about the editorial, he asked the question, "How would your wife like having her hair done in a beauty parlor also serving Blacks?" I said, "Wait a minute. I'll ask her." So I asked her, and she said that prospect didn't bother her, but if I didn't get off the telephone and get ready for a party to which we were invited, I would be in a lot of trouble. The president heard our exchange, and when he said goodbye, I could tell he felt my wife had let him down.

Also at this time, Charleston's white hotels had refused to accept a reservation from Ralph Bunche, distinguished Nobel Prize winner and one of the principals in founding the United Nations. He had come to Charleston to speak at the state capital. Here's another personal reminiscence. In a conversation with Willard Brown, Charleston lawyer, I had learned that Huntington's hotels were accomodating Black guests. He had recently been one. In an editorial, I urged Charleston's hotels to duplicate Huntington's policy. To my astonishment, a middle-aged man who I know by sight but not by name, came into my office the day the editorial appeared to protest. During our discussion, he told me that my information about Huntington was incorrect. I said that I didn't think it was. We argued. Finally, I picked up the telephone and called Brown, who assured me that the editorial was accurate, and if I had any doubts, I could call the manager of the hotel at which he had stayed. I relayed this information to my visitor whose parting remark was, "Are you going to believe that nigger or me?"

The first legal action taken in West Virginia against a board of education was taken in 1926 to permit Blacks to use the facilities of Charleston's public

library. Twenty-nine years later, six actions were filed to initiate or to accelerate desegregation of schools in Greenbrier, Raleigh, Mercer, Logan, McDowell and Cabell. In the Greenbrier County suit, defense counsel intimated that the Board of Education might not obey orders of the federal court. Judge Ben Moore said that if members didn't obey his orders without appealing to a higher court, those members would be put behind bars.

Across West Virginia the media's reaction to the Brown Decision was one of acceptance. No editorials I'm aware of suggested either that the decision should be defied or that it was a judicious monstrosity, as too many newspapers located to our south trumpeted. The general attitude is perhaps best summed up by an editorial in the Wheeling Intelligencer entitled Equality Under Law. The editorial said, and in part I quote: Even those who have practiced and supported racial segregation have known that it is a denial of the basic American principle of equality of citizenship. (Unquote.)

Then the editorial focused on the court decision, saying, and I quote: It is difficult to see how anybody can quarrel with that reasoning. It simply means that under the law there is no color or class distinction. Everybody knows that to be true. Everybody knows that it always was true, and that the separate but equal facilities doctrine was simply a legalistic means of avoiding the consequences of a declaration of right for which public sentiment was not yet prepared. (Unquote.)

At the other end of the state, the Bluefield Daily Telegraph noted of the Brown Decision that both the Eisenhower administration and the Truman administration favored ending segregation. In the south, the editorial said, and I quote: Where most of the Negroes reside, but do not vote in large numbers, the politicians were violently opposed. In the north and west, where few Negroes reside, it was no political problem. The border states, like our own West Virginia,

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were divided in sentiment. (Unquote.) The editorial then pointed out that it would require a year or more to work out the details to end segregation and recommended in the interim that all citizens, white and Black, should remain calm, because, said the editorial, and again I quote: Right or wrong, the Supreme Court is the highest authority in a national government by law. It is the last word. We must abide by the decision. (Unquote.)

It would be wrong to suggest that West Virginia integrated its schools as quickly as the state should have, but when one considers what happened in too many states, the West Virginia record is light years superior. Moreover, by 1960, the schools of the state were largely integrated and by then it was additionally clear that except for pockets of resistance, our state would be integrated in all respects. In bringing about the changes that should have been brought about years previously, relationships between whites and Blacks weren't damaged. Had they been, I doubt that Teddy White in his book, "The Making of a President," which as we all know was his account of John Kennedy's presidential quest, would have written, and I quote: To this bleak picture of hunger and politics one should add, in all justice, a condition that most of us who reported West Virginia in the spring found little time to note--that these are handsome people and, beyond doubt, the best-mannered and most courteous in the nation. These are people who teach their children to say "Sir" and "Thank you" to their elders; they speak in soft and gentle tones; their relations with their Negroes are the best of any state with any significant Negro population, north or south. The Negroes, being treated with respect and good manners, reciprocate with a bearing of good manners and respect. Whether on a West Virginia bus or in a crowded West Virginia store, men and women are well-behaved and friendly. (Unquote.)

Not all discrimination in America, I'm sorry to say, has ended. On the job front, Blacks are still the last hired and the first fired. Even so, this situation is improving. The overall ratio of Black to white income is 74 percent, but note please, that the higher the educational level, the higher the income ratio. Among college graduates, Black to white income is 90 percent. So Blacks attending this school are making a wise investment in their and their country's future.

I want to end my talk on a positive note, because, following the Brown Decision, West Virginia's attitude toward it, official and unofficial, was positive. The state would comply. Thus, one year after the decision, the Wellsburg Kiwanis Club, whose membership was white only, passed a resolution commending the Brooke County Board of Education and county school officials for their prompt and effective integration of the public school system. And to validate this resolution, the club voted to drop its "White Only" exclusion rule.

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